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SUBJECT: AMB. FOLEY DISCUSSES IRAQ REFUGEE ISSUES WITH
GENEVA HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Ambassador James B. Foley, Senior Coordinator for Iraqi Refugee Issues, visited Geneva from October 28-30 to meet with Geneva humanitarian organizations and donor missions. He was accompanied by Shirley Woodward from PRM/ANE. Foley held meetings with officials from UNHCR, ICRC, IFRC, IOM, WHO, ICMC, and held a round-table discussion with more than 15 donor mission representatives. The visit allowed Ambassador Foley the opportunity to brief officials on U.S. views of the current return of Iraqi refugees and the need for continued strong assistance to Iraqi refugees in host countries in the region. End Summary.

TIME TO BEGIN PLANNING FOR REFUGEE RETURNS

¶2. (SBU) On October 28, DCM Storella hosted a dinner for Ambassador Foley with key contacts from the Geneva-based humanitarian organizations. Participants included Erika Feller, Assistant High Commissioner, UNHCR; Andrew Harper, Chief, Iraq Support Unit, UNHCR; Redhouane Saadi, Regional Advisor, IOM; Ibrahim Osman, Deputy Secretary General, International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC); Dominik Stillhart, Deputy Director of Operations, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC); Eric Laroche, Assistant Director General, WHO; Johan Ketelers, Secretary General, International Catholic Migration Center (ICMC).

¶3. (SBU) There was general consensus among the group that the government of Iraq's current effort to promote refugee returns is not credible and that the government is not capable of receiving massive numbers of returnees. At the same time, all agreed that the GOI did need technical support to help build its capacity to respond to possible large-scale refugee returns in the future. Several participants said that the bulk of refugees planning to return to Iraq will look closely at how well internally displaced persons (IDPs) are welcomed back in their places of former residence and will place a high premium on security conditions in their specific neighborhoods before returning. While conceding that the GOI remains unlikely to provide any direct support to refugees in neighboring countries, there was agreement on the need for the GOI to improve its outreach efforts towards the refugees, which would, in turn, increase their confidence in the government when the refugees do return to Iraq.

¶4. (SBU) Discussants agreed that to provide effective support and increase the international community's credibility, UN agencies need to boost their presence inside Iraq and to increase their work beyond the international zone in Baghdad. According to several participants, this will also build confidence among local populations when they see greater international presence in different parts of the city. Stillhart and Osman both said that despite problems with senior level management in the Iraqi Red Crescent

Society (IRCS), it still has the best local network of contacts throughout Iraq for the delivery of humanitarian relief.

15. (SBU) Feller expressed concerns that several European countries are anxious to send Iraqis now offered temporary asylum status back to Iraq and may be over-eager to accept news of increased security in Iraq. She has been engaging them to discourage non-voluntary returns at this point, or at least to consider returns on a phased approach, e.g. limiting them to those returning to areas known to be safe. Harper also mentioned that the Netherlands is hosting an EU Conference in the Hague next month that is designed to look at conditions of return in Iraq but lamented that UNHCR is not invited to this conference. (Note: Both Harper and IOM officials separately confided that Danish Immigration officials met with them this week to talk about possible returns to Iraq and inquired as to access to social services in places like Kirkuk. Harper, however, said that he is unclear as to what exactly Denmark is interested in. End note.)

ICRC: FOCUS ON HEALTH, WATER AND SANITATION IN IRAQ

16. (SBU) Ambassador Foley also met with Beatrice Megevand-Roggo, Head of Operations for the Middle East and North Africa at ICRC. Roggo said that ICRC's 2009 Iraq Program will have a budget of around CHF 95 million (approx. USD 85 million), or ten percent smaller than its 2008 program. She attributed the decrease mostly to the costs in scaling up ICRC's presence in 2008 and the fact that there

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has not been additional massive displacement this year. ICRC will concentrate on the health and water/sanitation sectors inside Iraq. Roggo explained that ICRC's approach will be to address community needs and not just to provide assistance to returnees (IDPs) in its activities. She noted that targeting only IDPs for assistance could create tension among residents who have remained in place over the years and who may perceive returning refugees and IDPs as privileged individually, albeit a burden for the community. Thus, ICRC's projects will be in areas with a high concentration of IDPs but will aim to benefit the entire community. Roggo cautioned that militia groups will have greater influence in rural areas if international assistance does not also target areas outside of Baghdad. According to Roggo, ICRC has offices in Baghdad, Najaf and Basra, it has just opened an office in Ramadi, and plans to open another office in Kirkuk. Roggo explained that the public perception of ICRC is also improving. ICRC had severely limited its exposure following the bombing of its Baghdad office in 2003, such as driving in unmarked vehicles and not advertising its work on community projects. ICRC is increasingly using the Red Cross symbol on its vehicles in select areas and communicating through public means its assistance activities in Iraq so that the local population understands what ICRC is doing.

17. (SBU) Ambassador Foley explained that most refugees will wait to see how well IDP returns go before deciding whether or not to return to Iraq. Foley described current efforts to return IDPs to their former communities that have been supported by MNF-I and GOI military units as having been surprisingly successful in even the most difficult communities in Baghdad, such as Hurriya. Roggo said she is encouraged by this, but wondered whether or not such expensive, smaller-scale operations can be sustained financially and/or politically when applied at a much broader level, particularly in those parts of Baghdad that have been thoroughly "cleansed" ethnically. Roggo pointed to experience in the Balkans that shows just how hard it can be for people to return to areas occupied by opposing ethnic populations. She said that although it is not politically correct to discuss at this early stage, she is not convinced that returns to all such ethnically "cleansed" areas in

Baghdad will be possible. Roggo said that while some returnees do go to their original homes, others are going to other parts of the city and renting their homes out to other Iraqis in their communities of origin. Finally, Roggo said another key factor for refugees will be the rehabilitation of major infrastructure in Iraq. She said that not all Iraqi refugees left for security reasons, but that day-to-day living inside Iraq had become so difficult for many Iraqis that leaving was the only rational solution. She explained that corruption is a major factor behind the poor delivery of services from the GOI.

IOM: CLOSE COOPERATION ON RESETTLEMENT

18. (SBU) At IOM, Ambassador Foley met with Pasquale Lupoli, Director of Operations; Davide Mosca, Director of Migration Health Department; Michel Tonneau, Chief of Movement Management Division; Marco Boasso, Chief of the Emergency Division; and Redhouane Saadi, Regional Advisor. Foley thanked IOM for the strong support on Iraqi resettlement in FY2008 and stated that the U.S. is aiming even higher in FY2009 on Iraqi return numbers. Foley also discussed efforts to improve IOM access in Syria but noted that the latest crisis in relations would make significant change unlikely in the short run. Tonneau said the EU is sending an assessment team to the region next week, composed of ten EU Member States, in order to look at the possibility of an EU program for Iraqi resettlement. IOM noted that the numbers of any Iraqis to be resettled from this effort would likely be small, but he is encouraged that France is leading this initiative as it has recently agreed to resettle some 400-500 Iraqis, mostly from Syria and Baghdad.

19. (SBU) Foley mentioned that in-country processing seems to be going well but asked if IOM could consider boosting its current in-country staff from six to eight officers and to extend deployment of its staff from four to six weeks on a rotational basis. Foley stressed this had not been decided yet within PRM but that it was important IOM not have any personnel gaps in order to ensure a steady flow of referrals.

IOM replied that there are many issues that would need to be considered, particularly with regard to the workload on its staff, but he agreed that IOM cannot allow staffing gaps. Tonneau requested further feedback from PRM as to what sort of financial support IOM would receive. In response to a question from Foley on employment verification of in-country

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SIV applicants, Tonneau said that IOM is already doing this for Sweden, New Zealand, and Australia, albeit on a very limited basis.

10. (SBU) Foley also explained that the U.S. does not believe that now is the time to promote large-scale repatriation of Iraqi refugees and described the GOI's recent efforts as ill-advised and asked IOM to work closely with MODM in order to strengthen its capacity to deal with ongoing IDP returns. Foley also raised the issue of IOM's Iraq Chief of Mission's recent unauthorized visit to Syria, which had led to serious friction with the Syrian authorities and suggested that IOM should reexamine its representation in Iraq. Lupoli expressed his view that there had been an unfortunate misunderstanding between IOM and the GOS, but said that IOM does plan to send the new IOM DG, Bill Swing, to Syria and Jordan and hopefully to Iraq in the near future, something the previous DG had never done.

UNHCR: MOVE OUT OF THE GREEN ZONE

11. (SBU) Ambassador Foley held a separate meeting with Andrew Harper on UNHCR's Iraq planning for 2009. Harper reiterated UNHCR's plans to focus on building up its capacity in Baghdad and plans to reinforce cooperation with partners inside Iraq, including MODM and some 2,300 local NGOs that

have been referred to UNHCR by MFN-I and the Iraqi Security Forces. He noted that the current U.S. Battalion has provided contact information and comments for its 47 existing local partners. He also repeated UNHCR's plans to open eight return assistance centers. Foley and Harper also discussed resettlement in FY2009 and Foley underscored the importance that UNHCR boost its monthly referral numbers, particularly in Syria, so that the U.S. can meet its goals for the coming year. Foley also questioned UNHCR's figures for Iraqi resettlement needs in the region, which are currently at 100,000 persons. Harper agreed that this figure is somewhat out of date and explained that UNHCR would soon begin reviewing its eligibility guidelines for Iraqis. (Note: In a separate conversation with RMA Officer, Harper said the figure would likely drop to 50,000-60,000 in need of resettlement. End note.) Foley also encouraged Harper to ensure the assistance component to refugees in host countries is not overlooked in its 2009 Appeal. Harper indicated that he believes UNHCR will be fine if the Iraq program is fully funded.

MEETING WITH DONOR MISSIONS

¶12. (SBU) Ambassador Foley ended his meetings with a briefing to donor missions. Participating Missions included: Sweden, Denmark, Ireland, Czech Republic, Germany, Australia, the European Commission, Finland, Canada, Estonia, the Netherlands, UK, Turkey, Japan, France, Egypt, and Kuwait. Foley reviewed for the Missions his visit to Baghdad and Jordan and U.S. plans for resettlement of Iraqis in FY2009. The main message he communicated was that while the U.S. agrees with the overall objective of the GOI to support the return of refugees, the U.S. does not agree with the current methodology used to return Iraqis nor with the timing. Foley also noted that it would be difficult for the USG to continue funding the humanitarian agencies' Iraq programs at the same levels as in 2008 and he made a strong pitch for other donors to step up to the plate in support of UNHCR's 2009 Iraq Program.

Ambassador Foley has cleared this cable.
TICHENOR